

The Reboot

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Seminary, Divinity School, Bible College: What's the Difference?

What is the difference between a Seminary, Divinity School, and Bible School?

It's a good question to ask. Most people go to seminary, bible school, or whatever you call it to prepare for work in ministry. What follows is a brief break down of the differences between these types of theological education, as well as the pros and cons each present. At the end, I'll give my personal viewpoint.

Keep in mind that these are general definitions and explanations. There are exceptions to them all.

Divinity School

- A school of graduate-level theological education that is attached to a university.
- Offers graduate degrees (M.Div., MTS, STM, etc.) and perhaps certificate programs.
- Bachelor degree needed prior to admission.
- Students can apply for federal funding.

Example(s): Howard University School of Divinity, Duke University School of Divinity, Candler School of Theology at Emory University

The main thing to keep in mind about a divinity school is that it is often a part of a larger body of schools within a university. For example, Howard University has a divinity school, a law school, a school of social work, and communications. This harkens back to the old days when theology was viewed as a major discipline for general education. This doesn't mean that divinity schools can't have denominational roots. Often, they divinity school retains the denominational character of the university's heritage. It just means that a divinity school's primary connection is to the university that it resides in. Because of their attachment to

major research universities, there is a tendency for divinity schools to be moderate to liberal leaning in their theology. A notable exception to this is Regent University School of Divinity, which is conservative evangelical leaning.

SCHOOL OF DIVINITY, WHICH IS CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL LEARNING.

Pro(s)

- Exposure to a multitude of perspectives, beliefs, and resources.
- Generally more freedom to pursue higher-level academic work.
- Offers the main degree needed (M.Div.) for ordination in most mainline denominations.
- Academic support for terminal degrees.

Con(s)

- Most have to charge graduate level prices due to the connection to the university.
- Can be very “heady” and focus on theory, with less attention to practical realities of ministry.

Seminary

- A school of graduate level education that is primarily affiliated with a denomination.
- Offers graduate degrees (M.Div., MTS, STM, etc.) and perhaps certificate programs.
- Bachelor degree needed prior to admission.
- Students can apply for federal funding.

Example(s): Wesley Theological Seminary (Methodist), Capital Bible Seminary (Multi-denominational, but evangelical in perspective), Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopalian)

Divinity schools and seminaries share many traits. The major difference is the institutions with which they are primarily connected. Seminaries serve as the training arm for a denomination's ministers. Methodists tend to go to Methodist schools, Baptists tend to go to Baptist schools, and so on. This is all depending on the individual goals of the student, of course. Some seminaries, like Princeton Theology Seminary, are known for the high level of scholarship that they produce. That doesn't mean that seminaries aren't academic; that's far from the case. It's just that programs at a seminary will be more geared toward practical ministry practices. Because of their denominational affiliation, seminaries tend to be more moderate in their theological identities. That is, unless the denomination its attached to is extremely conservative (the Southern Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Theology Seminary) or extremely liberal (The United Church of Christ and United Seminary).

Pro(s):

- Ability to extensively experience one theological tradition.
- Less bureaucracy (don't have to deal with university systems).
- Tends to be a little less expensive than a divinity school.
- More focus on practical ministry.

Con(s):

- Less access to resources to research other Christian traditions

- Less access to resources to research other Christian traditions.
- o Less support for non-traditional ideas and/or theological positions.
- o Possible to feel like a "fish out of water" if you don't belong to the seminary's denominational tradition.



(<https://reboot4life.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/college-seminary.jpg>)

Bible School

- o Post-secondary education (but usually not graduate level).
- o Primarily for people that want to have a deeper understanding of the Bible from a faith perspective.

Example(s): Washington Bible College, Emmaus Bible College, Eternity Bible College

Bible colleges used to be popular in the United States. Now, they are few in number. Some are accredited (meaning you can apply for federal funds), but a good number are not. They offer a theologically-based education, but they tend to lean toward fundamentalism[1]. If you're seeking to be ordained, this isn't the choice for you. But if you can find one that has a robust general education program, this might be worth a look.

Pro(s):

- o Tend to be far less expensive, and therefore more accessible, to people who want college education.
- o Tend to have small populations.

Con(s):

- o Many aren't accredited.
- o Tend to teach the Bible from a more fundamentalist position.

Bible Institute

- o Provides training programs for people that want to understand Scripture better.

Pro(s):

- o Inexpensive.

Con(s):

- Completion of a program isn't useful for other endeavors.

Most of these schools aren't accredited, so they won't be helpful to anyone that is seeking ordination. Also, the theology tends to be very, very conservative, with little to no chance to study broadly. Many don't require a high school diploma to enter. The notable exception to all of this is Moody Bible Institute. Moody is accredited and offers undergraduate and graduate degrees.

As for my story, I went to a divinity school and a seminary. I attended Howard University School of Divinity to complete my Master in Divinity. Then, realizing that I needed some extra work to prepare for doctoral studies, I went to Wesley Theological Seminary to pursue a Master of Theological Studies. As you can see, my goals had an academic bent, so I went to schools that allowed me the freedom to do just that.

Generally, I advise people against theological education unless they are (1) getting scholarship and/or grant money to go and (2) they absolutely need it for their career goals (ordination, doctoral studies, etc.). I touch on why that is in a previous blog post (<https://reboot4life.wordpress.com/2014/08/05/what-i-learned-in-seminary-introduction/>).

So there you have it. Was this helpful? Any more questions? All put the good ones in another blog post.

[1] A quick definition from Wikipedia: "a form of a religion, especially Islam or Protestant Christianity, that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture."



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